

12

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Reformers try to 'cleanse' Philippine Army

Fed up with patronage and corruption, officers are scouring the ranks

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The reform movement in the military is "potentially the most significant development in Philippines politics in the last year," says one senior diplomat here.

There was probably a measure of wishful thinking in the diplomat's statement. As communist insurgency here grows, Western countries — foremost among them the US — are keen to see a revitalization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), long weakened by corruption and low morale.

However, the reform movement is nebulous in organization and membership, and serious questions have been raised about the genuineness of its leaders' motivations. But it has already had a major impact on Philippine politics.

Over two decades of rule, President Ferdinand Marcos had shaped the military into a powerful political weapon. Between 1972 and 1980 the size of the AFP tripled to about 250,000 men. Tightly controlled by the President's kinsman and confidant, Chief of Staff Fabian Ver, the AFP's primary function was to perpetuate President Marcos's rule.

Officers now openly say that one of their main jobs was helping to fix elections. The small group of generals loyal to General Ver were generously rewarded, but the AFP's fighting capacity declined.

And insurgency grew. In 1972 the Communist Party of the Philippines could probably field fewer than 1,000 guerrillas, now it has about 20,000.

At the moment General Ver is on leave while being tried for complicity in the 1983 murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. Ver's lawyer, who predicts that the charges will soon be dropped, says the general will return to his position as chief of staff. But if he does, Ver is liable to find the officer corps less obedient and malleable than when he left.

The reformers say they want a "professional-minded officer" with a "correct sense of priorities" to become chief of staff. They also hope to keep the AFP out of the next elections (local elections are due next year, presidential elections in 1987).

"In the past the politician with most money could buy the local military commander," said a reform group leader. "We'd like to build up awareness of the problems so that by election time AFP officers will have the guts to reject political pressure."

The reform movement surfaced in March, at the annual graduation ceremonies of the prestigious Philippines Military Academy. A "preliminary statement of aspirations" said that the officers — mostly academy graduates in their 20's and 30's, ranging in rank up to colonel — had looked to senior offi-

cers for leadership "but had found most of them too high to be nonpartisan, too comfortable to be interested, or too wealthy to care."

A later statement demanded the "cleansing" of the armed forces, and stressed that AFP loyalty "must be directed to the Constitution, not to any individual or group of persons."

Many of the reform movement's active members are counter-insurgency or intelligence specialists. Many of its leaders apparently come either from the Philippine Constabulary or the staffs of Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile or Lt. Gen. Fidel Ramos, currently acting chief of staff.

General Ramos and his close ally, Mr. Enrile, are currently engaged in a vigorous, but so far unsuccessful, effort to turn Ver's temporary leave of absence into permanent retirement. This has led both the radical opposition and the government to claim that the reform movement is simply a new tactic adopted by Ramos and Enrile to wrest power from Ver and his supporters.

The reform leaders deny this, though they do agree that the emergence of the movement dovetails perfectly with the tactical needs of Ramos and Enrile.

One fear of the Enrile-Ramos group has long been that General Ver was planning a coup. Troops were already deployed around the capital in position to support this, they claimed. The military would take action either to shore up President Marcos' power, or to assure the accession to power of the President's wife Imelda, if he were suddenly to die or become incapacitated. The reformers say the emergence of their movement has already "scuttled" any such plans.

But even if the movement was initially encouraged by Ramos and Enrile, the reform program responds to the concerns of many counterinsurgency officers who are disturbed at the growth of the guerrilla movement and the depth of popular disaffection with the government.

The government's response to the reform movement has been publicly restrained but in private borders on the peevish.

The reformers stress that both their politics and tactics are moderate. But while the reform group explicitly disavows violence as a means to obtaining changes, other officers are less patient. Some sources say that informal groups of officers, unconnected with the reform movement, are meeting regularly and talking of the need for "more extreme" measures.

One of the more impatient officers is a young military academy graduate assigned to a high insurgency area. He expressed both sympathy and frustration with the reform movement.

"All they do is gripe," he said. "They don't act. The President knows that his ministers, his friends, and his generals have stolen millions or even billions of pesos, but he doesn't do anything."

The officer predicted the crucial test would come at the presidential elections.

"If Marcos is defeated, fine. If he's re-elected and he revamps the system, fine. But if he's re-elected and doesn't clean up, we'll have to see what can be done."